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Intersections: Art and the Museum as Sites for Civic Dialogue

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"This program is a reminder that looking at art is a team sport."
– Museum member and regular attendee of Intersections

In early 2019, the selection of *Green Book* as the Best Picture of the Year sparked debates about the ways that interracial power dynamics have been configured in and by popular Hollywood films. Critics characterized its portrayal of a friendly employer/employee relationship between a black musician and a white chauffeur as "retrograde," especially in relation to representations of African American power and agency in two other films nominated that year, *Black Panther* and *Black Kkklansman*.[1] While writers in the media looked to the recent past for precedence, likening the win to past problematic winners *Driving Miss Daisy* (1990) and *Crash* (2006), taking a longer view into American visual culture had the potential to complicate the issue even further. With this opportunity in mind, and in order to create space for that timely conversation within an art museum one week after the awards show, we broached the topic within "Intersections," a public, gallery-based program at the Art Institute of Chicago. The monthly, one-hour conversation enables adults from a range of ages and backgrounds to come together around artwork and contemporary social and political issues. For this iteration, I collaborated with Danielle Eady, then a student in the dual Art History/Arts Administration Masters degree program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. We structured the discussion primarily around *The Irish Question*, a nineteenth-century trompe l'oeil painting in the museum's collection, also bringing in contemporary *Harper's Weekly* illustrations by Thomas Nast. We wanted participants to consider ways in which racial constructions were made manifest in and by 19th century visual culture, and also to reflect on how the participants' own experiences with racial identity and representation affected their perceptions of the images and film.[2] Danielle was also interested in structuring a

[1] Justin Chang, "Must Reads: Oscars 2019: Why 'Green Book' is the worst best picture winner since 'Crash'," *Los Angeles Times*, February 24, 2019. https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-oscars-green-book-worst-best-picture-winner-20190224-story.html. Accessed August 8, 2019.

[2] Eady was one of ten students selected to participate in the Museum Education Graduate Scholars (MEGS) program, a collaboration between the Art Institute of Chicago and the School of the Art Institute, a two-semester seminar and practicum in fall 2018 and spring 2019. Her final project

way for the largely white program attendees to understand whiteness as a historical construct that continues to inform their experiences of the world.

Although the field of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and the articles in this journal are primarily concerned with college and university settings, the increase in the number of museum-related essays published in it has been noticeable. As someone who mostly teaches in museum settings at this point in my career, assessing gallery-based learning among adults can be challenging without the formalized assessments of course curriculum or the ability to gauge cumulative growth over an academic term. Moreover, educators who facilitate museum experiences with adults often recast learning outcomes in terms of meaning-making, de-emphasizing the acquisition of knowledge such as facts, dates, and artistic movements in favor of less prescribed takeaways. Meaning-making recognizes that learning involves making sense of new information in terms of what one already knows, yet new encounters also have the potential to destabilize prior experiences and assumptions.[3] The need to assess impact in increasingly data-driven museums is one motivator for museum educators to look to SoTL for methodologies for gathering participant data beyond the well-worn visitor survey widely used by museum educators for program evaluations. But I am particularly excited by the potential exchanges we can have about pedagogy[4] across higher education and museums in the face of the turn towards deeper public engagement in both sectors.[5] Ideological divides and the structural racism

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was to create a toolkit for docents and other educators to talk about race within the context of K-12 school tours. We used her participation in Intersections to pilot some of the exercises she proposed in the toolkit.

[3] George Hein, "Is Meaning Making Constructivism? Is Constructivism Meaning Making?," *The Exhibitionist* 18, no. 2 (1999), 15-18.

[4] I use the term "pedagogy" here because it is the more widely used term for characterizing the methods of teaching in formal learning environments, but "androgogy" is the more accepted term for adult free-choice learning contexts. Kimberly H. McCray, "Gallery Educators as Adult Learners: The Active Application of Adult Learning Theory," *Journal of Museum Education* 41:1 (2016): 11. The recent move to online formats in the face of the COVID-19 crisis by both higher education and museums underscores commonalities and challenges in creating engaging learning environments.

[5] An example of the argument aligning art history to current events and concerns is the series of essays edited by Laura M. Holzman, "Isn't It Time for Art History to Go Public?," introduction to Bully Pulpit, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2019), https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.2271. I presented on Intersections in April 2018 as part of a panel on socially engaged art history organized by Holzman for the Midwest Art History Society Conference in Indianapolis. One example of civically and socially engaged art history in action that appeared in this journal is Jennifer Borland and Louise Siddons, "Yay or Neigh? Frederic Remington's Bronco Buster, Public Art, and Socially-Engaged Art History Pedagogy,"

and inequities that characterize U.S. society, coupled with the lack of opportunities for productive and analytical public discourse, have made the questions of what we teach and how urgently important. We can position both the college classroom and the museum gallery as spaces where art historical methods and close engagement with art foster criticality, spark dialogue among former strangers, humanize difference, and facilitate reflection. Whether and how these goals can and are being attained, particularly in the one-time museum program, requires more discussion.

Intersections strives to redefine traditional notions of expertise within the museum space while engaging learners with the core methods of art historical inquiry.[6] Centered around objects on view in the galleries of the Art Institute, each session typically includes active learning strategies that have been shown to be effective for art historical learning: working in small groups, puzzling through primary source historical documents, creating a collaborative creative response, and role playing.[7] We create opportunities for bridging the gap between positivist, abstract, or theoretical approaches to art history and participants' own memories and experiences. In Intersections, small and large group conversations generate analytical reflection and the sharing of personal insights, encouraging productive dialogue around what can sometimes be polarizing current events. We aim for these discussions to be timely to enable people to continue having conversations with others after the program ends, and to see their own lives and understand the world – and art – in new ways. In this essay, I describe pedagogical strategies used in the Intersections program for spurring analytical discussions about current events and will discuss some initial attempts at understanding what participants gain, and also value, from this time spent reflecting on art and on themselves.

Art History Pedagogy & Practice 3, no. 1 (2018): https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ahpp/vol3/iss1/5.

[6] This main body of this essay was written between August 2019 and February 2020, the last month that Intersections took place. Final edits to the essay were done in late May after I left the Art Institute of Chicago and the museum closed due to COVID-19. Still, I kept the essay in the present tense as my former colleagues Sam Ramos and Allison Muscolino recently facilitated a session of Intersections via Zoom for some of the museum's volunteer educators. I do not know when or if the Intersections program will resume as part of the museum's regular program schedule.

[7] Marie Gasper-Hulvat reviews the types of active learning taking place in formal art history education in "Active Learning in Art History: A Review of Formal Literature." *Art History Pedagogy & Practice* 2, no. 1 (2017). https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ahpp/vol2/iss1/2. One notable example of a creative and interpretive assignment is Ellery E. Foutch, "Bringing Students into the Picture: Teaching with Tableaux Vivants," *Art History Pedagogy & Practice* 2, no. 2 (2018): https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ahpp/vol2/iss2/3

My former colleague, Robert Smith III, and I devised Intersections in the wake of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election and ongoing violence against and within communities of color. We saw the artworks on view, and the space of the museum itself, as potential resources for community members, visitors, and staff to make sense of the world. We thought the notion that museum workers or visitors needed to compartmentalize political or social issues apart from aesthetic interactions – and the idea that a large, urban encyclopedic museum could be neutral within a landscape of shifting and contested power – missed an opportunity to leverage the complexity of artworks as catalysts for discussions and reflection.[8] Within a busy museum events calendar that is typically planned four-to-six months in advance, I set aside an existing one-hour gallery program slot that would have been used for an educator- or curator-led talk for this new format starting in November 2016. Instead of publishing the program topic in the printed magazine for members or in an events brochure, the theme for each Intersections is selected about 10 days in advance and posted on the museum website. Holding space in this way allows facilitators to address issues as they happen or to respond as something gains urgency in the public sphere. This model has enabled us to address flashpoint issues of the past two years, such as the #metoo movement, gender policing in public restrooms, the National Football League player protests against the U.S. National Anthem, migrant detention camps, viral images of police violence, privacy concerns on the internet, information "echo chambers," and Christine Blasey Ford's testimony in the Justice Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court confirmation hearings. Intersections transforms the museum as a place where museum workers and visitors can explore together why these events are so fraught and how, collectively, we can use critical analysis and dialogue to create bridges across ideological divides.

Framing Intersections

Grappling with personal and political issues is not typically what visitors expect to do in the space of a one-hour gallery talk or tour. Since prospective participants in Intersections do not preregister for the program but instead all gather at a central meeting place – a large red sign that reads "Tours Meet Here" – as they would for most talks and tours, I always deliver the same introductory disclaimer in order to accurately and productively frame expectations about the nature of program and its subject matter.

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[8] I use the word "neutral" to allude to the broader conversations about museum responsibility and culpability catalyzed by the work of La Tanya S. Autry and Mike Murawski and Museum as Site for Social (MaSS) Action, among others. See Autry and Murawksi's recent essay, "Museums Are Not Neutral: We Are Stronger Together," *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2019), https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.2277.

A group gathers for Intersections in Griffin Court. Image courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.

"This is not a Highlights Tour where you will see 6-8 iconic artworks from the museum collection," I explain. "Instead, we will spend time with one or two works of art that offer us an entry to considering a particular current event or social question. We will shape the discussion together instead of me simply imparting information to you." Giving people the opportunity to opt-out if it is not the experience they are seeking has been key, and there are always a few who drift away from the group and decide not to participate. Museums have often been characterized as spaces of "informal" or "free-choice"[9] learning, because unlike

[9] Joe E. Heimlich and E. Elaine T. Horr, "Adult Learning in Free-Choice, Environmental Settings: What Makes it Different?" *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, no. 127 (Fall 2010): 57-66; Dana Dudzinska-Przesmitski and Robin S. Grenier, "Nonformal and Informal Adult Learning in Museums: A Literature Review," *The Journal of Museum Education* 33:1 (Spring 2008): 9-22; John Falk and Lynn Dierking, *Lessons without Limit: How Free-Choice Learning is Transforming Education* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002).

an education experience intended to grow skills or provide discrete and formalized training, the learning that happens in museums is much more open-ended and dependent on the learner's own identity, agenda, and pre-existing knowledge.[10] Once inside the museum, adults can choose to experience it in a self-guided or facilitated mode, or some combination of the two.[11] Further, the learning that happens is often related to and affected by a host of other factors such as the social experience, physical comfort, and the context of the visit – both what people are doing before and after and the motivations driving the visit. [12] Adult education theorists like Malcolm Knowles see intrinsic self-direction as central to adult learning broadly speaking, but museums have long operated as an "explicative system," conditioning generations of adult museum visitors to learn in more passive ways, as listeners to experts and consumers of exhibition narratives and wall labels.[13] Based on verbal and written feedback I received over the past few years from long-time attendees of museum programs, many still expect programs to follow the prescribed roles of expert/performer/artist and audience. When an experience was more casual or conversational than they expected, or when the facilitator emphasized question-asking over information-giving, people complained that the rigor of the gallery teaching had diminished, rather than recognizing an intentional shift in pedagogy or that program goals had changed.[14] In Intersections, we intend for participants to have space to make their own meaning rather than prescribing in advance what we hope they will take away.

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[10] Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and Education: Purpose, Pedagogy, Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 41-42. John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *The Museum Experience* (Washington, D.C.: Whalebone Books, 1992).

[11] McCray, "Gallery Educators as Adult Learners," 10-21. For one description of ways in which adults demonstrate numerous "learning behaviors," see Andrew Jay Svedlow, "Lifelong Learning in Museums: In Pursuit of Andragogy," *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning* 6 (1997): 29-39.

[12] John Falk has argued that these visitor types, what he calls Explorer, Facilitator, Experience-Seeker, Professional/Hobbyist, and Rechargers, have an even greater role than age, race, or education in dictating how someone will experience their visit to their museum of choice. Intersections has the potential to reach any of these types of visitors, though what they take away would vary. John Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

[13] Malcolm Knowles and Associates, *Andragogy in Action: Applying Modern Principles of Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984); Emilie Sitzia, "The Ignorant Art Museum: Beyond Meaning-Making," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 37:1 (2017): 73-87. Sitzia notes that "the apparent neutrality of museums' discourse and invisibility of their positioning can lead to a reinforcement of oppressive and exclusionary structures."

[14] For historical context on the shifting tides of educational practice in museums, see Elliot Kai-Kee, "A Brief History of Teaching in the Art Museum," in Rika Burnham and Elliott Kai-Kee, *Teaching in the Art Museum: Interpretation as Experience*. Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2011; and Danielle Rice, "Balancing Act: Education and the Competing Impulses of Museum Work," *Museum Studies* 29:1 (2003): 6-19.

Both the affective and intellectual dimensions of meaning making are context dependent.[15] In an art museum, the encounter has typically been formulated as that which happens between a person and an artwork. In Intersections, the interpersonal is also a rich arena for learning, as hearing another person's knowledge or life experience is just as likely as an artwork to confound a person's existing frames of reference. Indeed, interaction at every step – from the selection of the topic to the planning and experience – fosters learning opportunities.

The basic structure and tenets of the program have remained unchanged since it began. As there are always two facilitators for each session, planning for the program differs markedly from other gallery talks. The work is collaborative and represents diverse viewpoints from the start: by May 2020, there will have been 27 different facilitators, including 2 curators, 4 interns and fellows, and 3 graduate students.[16] No topics have ever been repeated. When Danielle and I worked together on the program about race and representation, I had the dual role of collaborator and professor, though the latter was secondary in the planning process. The research she had done into strategies for talking about race meant that I was learning from her as much as I was providing guidance on gallery or object-based teaching, or even on the history of American art. In other cases, I have worked with educators who hold equivalent or lower levels of positional power, and curators willing to share power and expertise with visitors and educators in a space where they tend to have greater status. It is not that knowledge of cultural and historical context, style, or theoretical and visual literacy are devalued, or that there is not still a place for the training and education of an art historian, curator or educator. But Intersections, and the goal of making the gallery space a more democratic one, has provided a framework for many of us to question our biases and develop a "critically reflective practice" in and beyond the program.[17]

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[15] Sharan B. Merriam and Barbara Heuer, "Meaning-making, Adult Learning and Development: A Model with Implications for Practice," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 15:4 (July-August 1996), 243-255.

[16] I have co-led 28 of the total 35 public programs in the past 3 years. These figures may vary slightly due to the closure of the museum in March 2020 due to COVID-19.

[17] Among others, noted contributor to museums and social justice issues and co-creator of the tumblr blog Visitors of Color, nikhil trivedi, has facilitated two Intersections programs and has helped to shape my thinking and practice on this front. See also Alyssa Greenberg, Anniessa Antar, Elisabeth Callihan, "Change-Making through Pedagogy," *Museum as Site for Social (MASS) Action Toolkit* (2017), 139-164 and 185-187. The Toolkit is available for free at https://www.museumaction.org/resources.

The one-hour duration of the program is both a constraint and opportunity that distinguishes museum from classroom learning. Careful scaffolding is key for creating trust quickly and allowing open and generative discussions, often among strangers, in a public space like a museum gallery. Besides its subject matter, this constructivist learning environment differs from a typical gallery tour in several key ways. First, we always use folding gallery stools. Because they can inhibit the easy movement of a group visiting numerous artworks, we do not typically offer them during gallery talks or docent-led highlights tours.[18] This may seem like a small detail but it is critical for Intersections. The use of stools has sometimes required additional layers of bureaucratic approval in certain exhibition spaces but even the facilitators use them in order to create a more democratic space for dialogue by physically putting everyone on the same level. Before breaking into small groups for initial discussions, facilitators always outline a set of conversation guidelines, or ground rules:

- Step up, step back and listen
    - If you're someone who is used to speaking out, consider stepping back and letting someone who might typically be hesitant to find their voice.
- Trust intent but understand impact
    - We may not all have the 'right' language or vocabulary but are all coming from a genuine desire to engage with one another, but that our words also do have impact.
- Use "I" statements
    - Know that your experiences are important here. Don't generalize about groups of people, especially groups to which you do not belong; instead, speak from your own personal experience.
- Don't freeze me in time
    - We don't hold anyone to one point of view and hope this is a forum where people can change their minds after hearing from others.

The statements set concise and clear expectations for respectful, inclusive, and reflective behavior. Feedback from participants indicate that these guidelines invite them to be brave in speaking amongst strangers and grant permission to be awkward or make a misstep, but also provide tools for taking on topics that may be uncomfortable.

[18] The Art Institute may offer stools to participants on more tours in the near future because of increasing concerns that the program format excludes people with limited mobility.

For the March 2019 program about race and representation we began as we do in many instances, by giving participants a prompt to consider on the walk over to the American art galleries. Taking a cue from an exercise that educator Sydney Garcia has used at the Museum of Us (formerly The San Diego Museum of Man), we asked participants to ponder the assumptions that people make about their race, nationality, ethnicity, gender, or age based on their name, and how they feel about these assumptions.[19] We hoped that beginning with a discussion of names would encourage people to reflect on the ways that their lives had been shaped by forces external to them while also building trust among the group before more directly addressing the topic of race. First in pairs and then as a larger group, we talked about the memories and emotions that surfaced when thinking about the assumptions others made about them because of their names or the ways that their names helped them feel part of a community. One person shared that their name was one they chose themselves in order to disrupt the normative gender binary that they felt did not apply to them; another described their name's long family history which helped them feel connected to tradition; and I shared that the first time my name appeared in print was in the local newspaper on a list of high school athletes whose name "you wouldn't want to spell on a deadline." By revealing something about myself apart from my professional position or the expertise I have due to my advanced degree, I deliberately reframed my role from educator to that of participant.

Participants introduce themselves and respond to an opening prompt. Image courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.

[19] Eady learned of this strategy during a phone conversation with Garcia, Senior Educator, during the course of her research in 2019.

Opening prompts are used in each program and aim to give everyone an opportunity to participate and they can reveal a surprising diversity of perspectives. Educators working in college classrooms have noted the importance of the "first five minutes" as a time for grounding students in the topic of the day with a provocative question that asks them to draw on knowledge gained through preliminary reading.[20] To frame a July 2018 discussion about the role of civility in public discourse, during which we discussed Kerry James Marshall's sculpture, *Africa Restored*, and Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Civil Disobedience*, my colleague Robin Schnur and I asked people to share the most uncivil thing they had ever done or seen. In the December 2017 discussion about representations of labor that centered posters from the Russian Revolution, educators Kyle Johanson and Elisheba Fowlkes-Dele asked people to talk about the time they most felt like a "worker," eliciting unexpected and poignant anecdotes. When answering the prompt people also introduce themselves, further allowing participants to see each other as individuals with their own knowledge and stories rather than as other anonymous members of an audience.

Artwork is always a primary resource in these discussions and not merely instrumentalized as a tool or illustration of the social issue at hand. We create a space for shared, collectively defined discourse that enables critical thinking about the conflicts of our time, personal reflection about our own position and history in relation to the issues, and the opportunity to hear others' perspectives that might conflict with our own understandings of the world. At the same time, participants also report that they gain an enriched understanding of the artist and artwork as operating within particular social, political, and historical contexts, both at the time the artwork was made and today. The juxtaposition of artworks, sometimes from different times and cultures, is often a helpful tactic for fleshing out an issue from contemporary life. For instance, in November 2017 Academic Curator Felicia Mings and I led a discussion inspired by the #metoo movement that considered when people felt called to speak out and the voice they used when they did. We focused on *Conduct Your Blooming,* a set of large banners that contemporary artist Cauleen Smith made to be paraded through the streets of the

[20] James Lang, "Small Changes in Teaching: The First Five Minutes," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 16, 2016. https://www.chronicle.com/article/Small-Changes-in-Teaching-The/234869. The use of a prompt and other "activities for inclusion" in adult learning is supported by research on Social and Emotional Learning for adults. "Three Signature SEL Practices: Creating the Conditions for Adult Learning," Oakland Unified School District Office of Social and Emotional Learning, August 2016. https://www.ousd.org/Page/15473.

Southside of Chicago in response to a controversial gallery exhibition.[21] In order to complicate people's understandings of the form that activist art might take beyond signs and posters, we compared Smith's large-scale work with an 18th century anti-slavery medallion modeled by William Hackford for the Wedgwood Manufactory that was widely disseminated in women's jewelry, hair ornaments, decorative arts, and prints. The group analyzed both the materiality of the objects, the former made of hand-stitched and collaged fabric, and the latter a two inch-tall stoneware silhouette of a kneeling man in chains. We also discussed the mode of address used in each work: individuals volunteered to read from the Gwendolyn Brooks poem, "The Second Sermon on the Warpland," that Smith excerpted for *Conduct Your Blooming*, while we interrogated the construction of agency within the slogan, "Am I Not A Man and A Brother."[22]

Although close looking at single artworks is almost always a component of the program, we also incorporate exercises that require more creative responses so that we can accommodate a variety of learning styles and modes of expression. In response to news stories about museums grappling with the unsavory behaviors and biographies of artists whose work they display, educator Alice Boone and I took on Pablo Picasso in September 2018. Formulating a discussion around one of Picasso's *Head of a Woman* paintings from summer 1909, we printed out copies of the *Oxford Dictionary of Art* entries on both the painter and his subject, Fernande Olivier (dozens of pages compared to a few meager sentences). Together with the group, we considered what aspects of the text were factual, omitted, or idealized, and whether artists' biographies and legacies should be altered when information comes to light about immoral or illegal activities. After a fulsome discussion of the encyclopedia entries, Alice introduced Gertrude Stein's biography of Picasso, proposing an alternative format. We then moved to look at Juan Gris's 1912 portrait of Picasso and participants wrote words on post-it notes that characterized the painting in front of them. Working in small groups, they arranged their observations into a collectively written poetic biography of Picasso, informed by the Cubist style of the portrait, their own interpretations, as well as other representations of the artist by historians and his friends. Their poems revealed an ambivalence and criticality suited to our times, amplifying the subjectivity inherent in biographical representation, of any genre. The

[21] "Cauleen Smith: The Black Love Procession," *The Visualist*, July 4, 2016. http://www.thevisualist.org/2016/07/cauleen-smith-the-black-love-procession-conduct-your-blooming/. Accessed November 15, 2019.
[22] Gwendolyn Brooks, "Sermon on the Warpland" from *Blacks* (Third World Press, 1994). https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52028/the-sermon-on-the-warpland. Accessed November 10, 2017.

expressiveness of their poems also highlighted the limitations and incompleteness of the more "objective" encyclopedia entry or museum label.

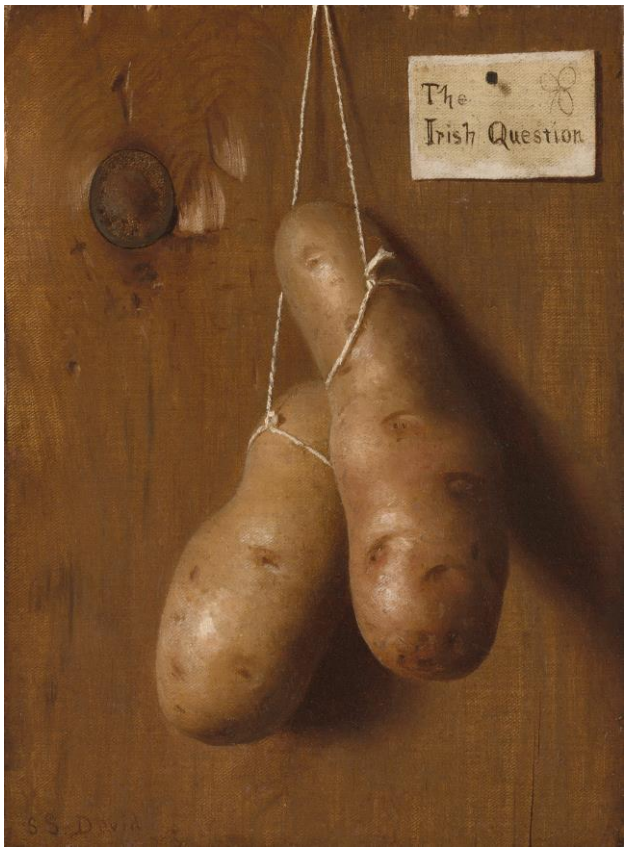
The Relevance of American Art

The Intersections program demonstrates that art can catalyze social bridging and personal reflection when relevance, and constructivist or participatory learning, is emphasized over the one-way transmission of information as knowledge.[23] Yet it also shows the value of art historical methodologies such as formal analysis, artwork comparison, understanding materials and artistic process, and gaining insight into historical context, as tools for reframing vexing contemporary issues. The Art Institute's encyclopedic collection has allowed us to take a variety of pedagogical approaches, with artworks made since 1960 lending themselves especially well to making connections to contemporary times. At the same time, investigating works of American art from the more distant past, particularly when considered apart from their place in the narrative of canonical art history, has been especially fruitful for discussing conflicts that have long troubled United States culture, history, and identity, such as the representation of race. Given the nature of this special issue on teaching American Art, I will once more return to the session that focused on *The Irish Question*, a nineteenth-century trompe l'oeil painting by DeScott Evans depicting two russet potatoes suspended against a rustic wood surface.

After having participants spend a few minutes individually writing down questions that arose when looking at the work, my co-facilitator Danielle led a lively discussion about the choices they perceived the artist making based on what they were seeing, how they interpreted the setting of the work, and how the painting made them feel. Responses to the latter question ranged from remarking on its uncanny quality and element of foreboding to the simultaneously present notes of humor and nostalgia, which took new focus when one person observed that there was a small piece of paper with the words "The Irish Question" inscribed onto it, painted to look like it was attached to the upper right corner of the composition. People then offered what they knew about the Irish migrations to the United States during the 19th century, including stories about their personal ancestors. They noted that the way the potatoes were hanging resembled the way boxing gloves are often represented, recalling the sport's place in Irish American

[23] For more on bridging, see Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000). For its relevance to the way art museums define and create community, see Mike Murawski, "Towards a More Community-Centered Museum, Part 3: Defining and Valuing Community," October 1, 2018. https://artmuseumteaching.com/tag/social-issues/. Accessed October 12, 2019.

culture. When someone else noticed that the artist's signature read "S.S. David," a discrepancy with the name listed on the label, it prompted some to speculate that Evans might not have wanted to be associated with the work's controversial subject matter, complicating some of the artist's choices they had noticed earlier such as the extreme mimesis, his use of even light and monochromatic color palette, and the seeming simplicity of the composition.



DeScott Evans, *The Irish Question*, 1880s. The Art Institute of Chicago.

We then divided people into small groups to discuss contemporary cartoons by Thomas Nast. First we gave them one in which the caption referred to an "Irish riot" against policemen on St. Patrick's Day, 1867. We asked them to explore two questions: "What is the artist's viewpoint?" and "What visual elements does the artist use to construct that viewpoint?" Once we came back together as a whole, we parsed through the chaotic composition and Nast's depiction of Irish faces and bodies, focusing particularly on identifying elements of stereotype. For some people, the oafish, violent characterization of the Irish came as a surprise, one that

offended them as Irish-Americans. Because of time constraints, we did not dwell too long on this image or the details of the event that it depicts. Rather, we wanted to further complicate our understandings of the status of the Irish in society at the time knowing there would not be time to resolve or even surface all of the questions posed by the imagery. We introduced two other contemporary cartoons that Nast drew for *Harper's Weekly*: "The Ignorant Vote," from late 1876, and "The Chinese Question," from February 1871. The small groups puzzled through one or the other image to answer the same two questions about which key visual elements contributed to communicating the viewpoint of the print. They talked about composition, the images' caption and other text-image relationships, and how stereotype and allegory functioned. Some remarked on the visual similarity between the two potatoes and the African American man and Irish man, both stereotypes hung in a precarious balance. Someone else noticed the similarity between the features of the "White" man depicted in "The Ignorant Vote," and the way that the Irish were represented in the "Irish Riot" image. Some participants who had recent experience with art history classes or other close-looking museum programs were able to more easily make sense of the artist's point of view and even speculate on the possible audience for the images. They drew on knowledge they had about the period and shared their insights to build understanding around the image on which they focused. Other participants were overwhelmed and confused. The abundance of small text, the cultural references and codes specific to the period, and what would be deemed today as offensive depictions of the Irish, African Americans, and Chinese alike were all challenges to processing the images in a brief, gallery encounter. Part of the intention behind introducing the Nast imagery was to challenge learners who may not have been as attuned to the subtleties of the Evans painting, or even within *Green Book* the film, with starkly racist imagery. Transformative learning, as formulated by Jack Mezirow, is based on adults having experiences that spur them to reevaluate and reflect on their assumptions.[24] When discrepancies surface between their beliefs and new information or situations, Mezirow argues, critical self-reflection and growth can occur.

To conclude the program, Danielle and I brought the discussion back to the *The Irish Question*, asking them to look back at the painting with fresh eyes. Now informed by the small group discussions that had unfolded among people with different backgrounds, many participants' perspectives had changed over the course of the hour. They pointed to similarities and differences across the images that underscored the ambiguous meaning of *The Irish Question*, despite its

[24] Patricia Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: a Guide for Educators of Adults* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1994), 159-60.

seeming veracity. Some understood the title of the painting to be more ominous than they had first perceived, while others appreciated the complexity of Evans's viewpoint, and the artistic choices he made, in a new way. At the end of the hour, as is often the case with Intersections, it still felt like there was much left to say or that we had just started to get to the meat of an issue. There is usually a notable energy among the group that has not found resolution or closure. People linger to continue the discussion, or take the issue and unresolved questions to pursue with others in their lives outside of the museum. One regular attendee told me, "My husband and I keep talking about the topic all the way home." Another person asked me if she could take a copy of the color print outs we had distributed of the Nast cartoons because she wanted to talk about them with her family at the dinner table that night. Even though we did not explicitly discuss the film that prompted this discussion of race in U.S. visual culture, by introducing a wide range of visual resources related to the status of the Irish in the nineteenth-century, we built a bridge between the questions of the past and issues facing us today. We hoped that people would take these tools to continue the conversation outside of the context of the program.

Measuring Outcomes

Data about how visitors navigate museum galleries, how many seconds they spend on average looking at an artwork, and what didactic or interactive materials they use to aid them in interpreting it, increasingly guides decision-making in museums.[25] But because of the critical importance of creating an environment of trust and openness, I had been wary of using surveys, focus groups, or other forms of qualitative program evaluation for Intersections that museum educators typically use to measure impact. As the program already takes the full hour, it could be perceived as an imposition – especially in a survey-saturated world – to ask people to provide extensive written feedback. Although gauging customer satisfaction is common practice, assessing the learning that happens as one might in a classroom, is ill-suited for adult learning in museums. We know people are having positive experiences because, in free-choice learning settings, people vote with their feet. At nearly every Intersections, repeat attendees – museum members age 60 and older, people who work in the museum or in the downtown area, and

[25] One example is Andrew Simnick, "The Power of Applied Data for Museums," *Alliance Blog*, January 17, 2017. https://www.aam-us.org/2017/01/17/the-power-of-applied-data-for-museums/. Accessed December 1, 2019. The Association for Art Museum Interpretation is one example of how the field of museum interpretation, to which visitor research and evaluation is a core practice, has become increasingly professionalized in recent years. For more than three decades, the Visitor Studies Association has been convening museum professionals and publishing articles around the topic.

staff and interns – comprise just under half of the group each month. Another woman brings her college student son to the program whenever he is home on a break from school. One married couple who are regular participants invited acquaintances to join them for one program. Now they meet for the program and lunch afterwards nearly every month. As to measuring learning outcomes, feedback and evaluation has largely been anecdotal. Partly prompted by the conventions of SOTL scholarship and the occasion of this essay, I experimented with different ways of measuring learning or change in the span of a program. The September 2019 topic, prompted by *Time's Arrow*, a reflective and retrospective project by Eleanor Antin, was about how the notion of self changes over time due to aging or a major life event (Antin's project was, in part, prompted by the death of her husband). In order to make the evaluation process seem relatively organic, we used both the Russell Affect Grid and a post-program survey to collect quantitative and qualitative data.[26] The Russell Affect Grid is intended to gauge the relative stimulation level of a person as they are experiencing something, and whether they are feeling more positive or negatively during the course of it.[27] We asked people to register how they felt at the very beginning of the program before we had looked at any art or had any discussions, and then again at the very end of the hour in order to measure the influence of the experience on their mood and energy level. Most of the 24 respondents moved to the pleasant and relaxed (rather than stressed, excited, or bored) areas of the grid over the course of the program, with the exception of one person, whose emotional state escalated sharply from neutral to stress. The evaluation tool does not include a mechanism for participants to share open-ended comments, however, so we do not know how the program's structure or content motivated such changes.

To overcome some of these limitations, we also asked people to take a brief post-program survey. It measured motivation for attending the program – whether it was the topic, the artist, or the format that spurred them – and asked people whether the program was informative, on the one hand, and meaningful, on the other. Of the 22 who turned in a survey, 45% indicated that they had attended because of a positive experience at a previous Intersections program and a sizeable number were curious about the format. All respondents said that the program was informative, indicating that they learned something about the artist and her work, and nearly 85% found the experience meaningful. One person

[26] James Russell, Anna Weiss, and G.A. Mendelsohn, "Affect Grid: A Single-Item Scale of Pleasure and Arousal," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57 (1989), 493-502.
[27] On the importance of considering emotion in adult learning, see John M. Dirkx, The Power of Feelings: Emotion, Imagination, and the Construction of Meaning in Adult Learning." *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, no. 89 (Spring 2001): 63-72.

remarked that physical changes evident in the artist's body over time resonated with their own experience aging, while another said that their interest in the topic led them to engage with an artwork they might not have invested as much in. When asked what components of the program people found most valuable the majority said that it was learning about the artist's work, while 40% said it was the chance to reflect on their own personal experience, which seems appropriate for a conversation about self-image.

The following month we did a post-program survey and again, just under half of attendees said they had participated in Intersections before. We have not yet attempted to measure how ongoing or repeated participation in the program may or may not amplify its benefits, but anecdotal feedback indicates that those who keep coming back value their interactions with people new to the program.[28] The 19 respondents unanimously indicated that the program was both informative and meaningful. Inspired by the weeks-long strike of Chicago Public School teachers and staff in October 2019, my collaborator Sarah Alvarez and I asked people to consider first what made them an individual, and when they might have had to subordinate that identity to take action on behalf of a collective. We paired *Untitled*, a painted frieze often described as a self-portrait by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, with a work from Faith Ringgold's Black Light Series, interpreting each work through social, political, and biographical contexts. We devised exercises to foster conversations they might not have had with people they already know or to connect with someone new, especially across generational lines. Interspersed in these discussions was close looking at both works, with a particularly rich discussion unfolding among the group as a whole about the geometric composition and use of text in Ringgold's painting. The lively exchange led one person to declare that participating in Intersections reminds him that "looking at art is a team sport." Yet rich thinking also unfolds on a more individual basis. According to the survey people found learning about Ringgold's life and work only slightly less valuable than the group conversations, and equally as valuable as reflecting on their own experiences. Ringgold's efforts to advocate for greater inclusion of African American artists in museum exhibitions resonated with the values and activism of an emerging educator in the group, while an older woman connected with the artist's efforts to balance motherhood with professional ambition. Some of this sense of connection and deep engagement with the artworks is captured in the survey results but not the visceral feeling of

[28] NORC at the University of Chicago recently worked with the Smart Museum on a pilot program to measure the ongoing resonance of visiting a museum exhibition. They developed a mobile application that asks people to respond to a text message to see if they have had further conversations or reflections after their visit. Findings have not yet been published. Personal conversation with Gwendolyn Rugg, Principal Research Analyst, February 21, 2019.

community in the gallery that day, evidencing the difficulties of assessing learning or other affective outcomes during this program.

Conclusion

How Intersections will eventually evolve is unclear, though it will undoubtedly be in response to the needs of the communities invested in and impacted by the museum. After more than three years as a public program – which admittedly excludes people from participating who cannot pay the $25 admission or visit the museum on a Friday at noon – we have employed the pedagogical framework for private groups a handful of times, including offering it as a breakout session at the 2017 Open Engagement conference for other educators, artists, and activists, to train museum docents, and with students at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. There has been great interest on the part of museum educators in institutions beyond the Art Institute in developing similar conversations around contemporary issues. Educator Sam Ramos is leading efforts at the Art Institute to adapt the format for personnel in the Illinois judicial system as part of trainings in core principles such as implicit bias and objectivity. Key elements of the methodology, such as the conversation guidelines, are used in other programs for different audiences at the museum when personal or political issues are broached. Significantly, the program has helped to change perception among staff and visitors alike about how the galleries and the art within them can be places for civic and social engagement along with personal meaning-making.

Art museums have the unique potential to contribute to civic discourse by promoting learning opportunities that "help adult learners become more critically reflective, participate more fully and freely in rational discourse and action, and advance developmentally by moving toward meaning perspectives that are more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative of experience.[29] Intersections has shown that art catalyzes opportunities for listening to others' perspectives, underscoring the benefits of holding nuanced, unresolved interpretations, and the ways a community might recognize that complexity together. Art historical scholarship and methodology serve as tools for transformative learning, and enable gallery-based experiences to have impact far beyond the museum.

Postscript

The image in this article that features unmasked program participants sitting in a huddled group on gallery stools, their heads leaning in to listen closely to one

[29] Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991), 224-225, as quoted in Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning*, 17.

another, seems like it was taken in another era. A year ago, museums and colleges around the country closed for in-person learning and programs and courses moved to virtual spaces. While teaching and learning under these conditions has been challenging in many ways, the intimacy and humanity of the Intersections format continues to stand out amidst so much art-related content available online. In December 2020, I joined a session of Intersections with nearly 100 others on the theme of isolation from my new home office 2,000 miles away from Chicago and the museum that continues to organize the program. After a period of meditative looking, I was sent into a Zoom breakout room with three other people to look closely at a Harry Callahan photograph of Chicago from 1950 that would not have been on view in the galleries had they been open. We listened to each other talk about the sounds and smells that the stark and snowy image evoked for each of us. I did not learn anything about Callahan but I felt rejuvenated by gathering together around art, in a setting that left ample space for emotion, honest reflection, and the sharing of stories. The form of Intersections is necessarily evolving – as is all teaching and learning about art in a post-COVID-19 world – but by carrying forward the program's tenets, museum educators continue to assert that why we teach is just as important to evaluate as how or what.